

The Ainu's Modern Struggle

Learning politics to survive.

Text and photographs by Skye Hohmann



Lake Kussharo in Akan National Park, eastern Hokkaido.

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Ainu Mosir is a country of sweeping vistas: forested slopes reach up to steaming volcanic peaks, waterfalls plunge down rugged mountains, and plains stretch to the horizon. Its forests team with wildlife. Migratory cranes overwinter in coastal marshes, foxes wander the hills, and the deeper wilderness is the habitat of the brown bear. Tourists flock here in winter for skiing and hot springs, and in summer for hiking and clear air.

Ainu Mosir is known to most by another name: Hokkaido. The northernmost of Japan's main islands, it is also the last remaining homeland of Japan's indigenous people, the Ainu.

Hokkaido is not a rich land. Outside cities and tourist destinations, the houses are small, shabby clapboard buildings. Nibutani, a little-known and less visited backwater near the southeastern coast is, for Japan, noticeably poor: the train runs infrequently from the gritty port town of Tomakomai through a rocky scrubland dotted with run-down factories before passing into an even emptier stretch of farmland. Few guidebooks include the area, and those that do merely glance over the town, mentioning the high proportion of Ainu living here and recommending the museum and cultural center. None suggests that Nibutani is currently at the nexus of a change that reaches far beyond the borders of Hokkaido.

Astute Gambit

I traveled to Nibutani in early July to witness what was, for some, the culmination of a long struggle, and for others, the beginning of a search for identity: the hosting of an interna-

tional Indigenous Peoples Summit, days before the 2008 Group of Eight (G8) Summit at the nearby resort of Toyako. Organizing the summit and officially welcoming both indigenous and G8 delegates to their ancestral homeland was an ambitious gambit by the Ainu that played a large part in spurring the Japanese government to grant them indigenous status.

The Ainu have been called a dying race, and by official count there are only 25,000 Ainu in Japan. However, it may be more accurate to say that the Ainu are just finding their feet. Ainu elder Saki Toyama puts it this way: "The Japanese government and all of Japan must recognize that the Ainu people are still here, and that we are stronger than ever." Being granted indigenous status is a huge step in a country that was, until 1997, officially monoethnic, and the numbers of self-proclaimed Ainu in Japan could jump in future as the stigma once associated with this so-called "primitive" race fades.

Hosting the first of what many hope will become the annual Indigenous People's Summit was an astute political move. Kamuisanihi Kibata was instrumental in organizing the summit, which brought together indigenous peoples from all over the world, including well-known activists such as Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, chairperson of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; La Donna Harris, founder of Americans for Indian Opportunity; and Magne Ove Varsi, executive director of Galdu Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to talk about indigenous rights worldwide and the Ainu struggle in particular. When I asked Kibata why they chose now to host the Indigenous People's

Summit, he told me: "This is a good time. Today the wind is blowing; while the wind is blowing we had to enact a decision for the improvement of indigenous peoples."

Displacement and Activism

The wind has not always blown favorably for the Ainu. Though Hokkaido's natural resources have long attracted interest from Japan, it wasn't until the Meiji Period (1868–1912) that *wajin* (ethnic Japanese) were encouraged to immigrate to Hokkaido to take advantage of the farm and pasture land that so resembled that of the Western nations Japan was striving to emulate. The Ainu were increasingly marginalized as their ancestral and sacred lands were redistributed to incoming Japanese settlers. ("I don't have any recollection of ever having sold or rented my land to *wajin*. Show me a document indicating rights to land lease," the late Shigeru Kayano, Ainu activist and Diet member, told his son.) Ainu were forced into farming unproductive areas and into jobs in the fishing fleet.

Japan's Meiji government heavily promoted the unification and homogenization of Japan, seeking to create a cohesive Japanese identity to present to the world after the end of Japan's over 200 years of self-imposed seclusion. In 1871 Japanese citizenship was granted to all Ainu in Japan. In 1889 the same government passed an act that labeled the Ainu as "former Aborigines," denying them indigenous identity. Japan magically became ethnically homogeneous; legally, at least, minorities simply ceased to exist. Ainu names were changed to Japanese ones. Traditional tattoos were forbidden. Bear sacrifice, the most important Ainu religious ritual, was officially banned. Special schools were opened for Ainu children, where they were taught exclusively in Japanese, and parents were encouraged to speak Japanese at home.

The Ainu language is still within a hair's breadth of vanishing; of the fewer than 100 native speakers recorded in the 1980s, no more than 15 used the language daily. That it has not disappeared is mainly due to Nibutani native Shigeru Kayano, the best-known of the Ainu activists. Kayano's work and charisma were instrumental in protecting the language.



Ainu elder in traditional garb.



Kayano's efforts led to the founding of 15 Ainu language schools, and his activism, as well as his propensity for asking questions in the Ainu language during Diet sessions, led to the Japanese government finally recognizing the Ainu as a minority group in 1997—the same year that the Ainu, with Kayano at their forefront, sued the government over the construction of the Nibutani Dam.

Another Dam Controversy

Nibutani is part of a sprawling settlement that straddles the Saru River, a shallow, gravelly stream that runs from the Hidaka Mountains in southeastern Hokkaido to the Pacific. In spring, snowmelt brings rushing waters, but the rest of the year narrow channels weave across a sandy floodplain. In 1973, plans were made to dam the river to provide water for a proposed industrial zone. When properties along the river were purchased, Kayano and a neighbor, Tadashi Kaizawa, refused to sell their land. When they subsequently received an expropriation order from the Hokkaido Land Expropriation Committee, Kayano and Kaizawa appealed in court.

The dam was completed before the case was fully heard. Sacred sites and traditional lands were lost forever beneath the waters. No industrial area was ever realized, and following a major typhoon in 2003, the dam silted up completely. That the court eventually ruled in favor of the Ainu plaintiffs was cold comfort.

Their voices, however, had been heard. It was during the trial that the government first acknowledged the Ainu as a minority. Precedent was set. The Ainu were granted minority status later the same year. These victories brought renewed

energy and funding to the Ainu's struggle for rights.

Dams remain a central issue in the Ainu struggle. Above the silted mess of the Nibutani Dam, the Biratori River flows into the Saru. A half-hour drive upstream lie the ancestral lands of Sachiko Kibata, a former student of Shigeru Kayano's. Fields bordered by deep windbreaks of deciduous trees stretch to the top of a ravine that drops down to the Biratori. A forested slope climbs steeply on the other side. Kibata points to a low triangular peak in the distance called Chinomosir, a sacred site where she remembers her grandfather praying and where a group of endangered falcons nests. The area is both beautiful and environmentally fragile. The planned Biratori Dam is to be constructed at the base of the Chinomosir, damaging the sacred site, disrupting the falcons, and flood-



Gathering of indigenous conference delegates on the ancestral lands of Sachiko Kibata.



The Biratori River: targeted for a dam.

ing Kibata's ancestral lands. Access road construction has already begun.

On July 2, Sachiko Kibata stood here surrounded by indigenous delegates from around the world, and told us her memories of the place. "When I was about nine years old my grandfather, who raised horses, lived in that grove over there. There would be fish traps set up in the river for trout and salmon, and they would catch so many fish just overnight, when the time came in the morning to get the fish, my grandfather would wake me up, and we would come back with a full bag of fish. My grandmother would meet us with a big smile, and it was her job to cut the fish into three pieces and dry it. I remember watching him pray at Chinomosir."

Not eager to repeat the mistake of the Nibutani Dam, the government set up an assessment committee. Sachiko Kibata was invited to be the sole Ainu member. Initially she was overwhelmed: "There are five or six men, and I'm the only granny. At first I felt I would sound ignorant and unlearned. However I began to feel that this is no good if I didn't say anything. So I finally I told them about Chinomosir. As the bot-

tom part of the dam is going to be constructed on the mountain, we need to have a festival before the construction. As a result, on December 2 a grand ceremony was held here, and both research and development groups made special foods and had a ceremony and a prayer, and I felt really happy, like I had done something good for my grandfather."

Unlike her son, Kamuisanihi, Sachiko is clearly not a political creature. When asked, she reluctantly gave her opinion about the dam: "I know there are job opportunities. I guess I'm in favor of it." But Kamuisanihi immediately intervened: "As her son, I am going to disclose to you her true feelings here, as we've discussed this in private many times. Actually, she is against it, she has said many time that she finds it sad to see her great-grandfather's place gone, she worries about environmental destruction. But because she is worried about other people's feelings, and the economy, she said what she said."

Mixed Emotions

Sachiko's opinion, however, was not an unfamiliar one to the indigenous delegates, whose people frequently face the conflict between displacement and the promise of construction jobs. Joan Carling, a delegate from the Philippines who has served as a member of the United Nations Environment Programme's "Dams and Environment" project, drew parallels with the San Roque Dam, constructed on indigenous land in the Philippines. "They did not originally oppose the dam, because of the promise of economic benefits," she warned. "But in the end they were relocated to a malaria-infested area where they cannot even plant rice. They were not compensated for their land. Even those who got work only had employment for three years, and now it only takes 12 people to run the dam."

The Ainu face many of the same issues as other indigenous groups do worldwide. Jobs are scarce, for instance. When I talked to Masashi Kawakami, he had just come off the stage, having beautifully recited part of a Yukar epic. At 26, Kawakami finally moved to Sapporo last spring to find work.

He is originally from Nibutani, where he began learning the traditional epic storytelling five years ago, and he longs to return. "If only there were office jobs there," he said wistfully.

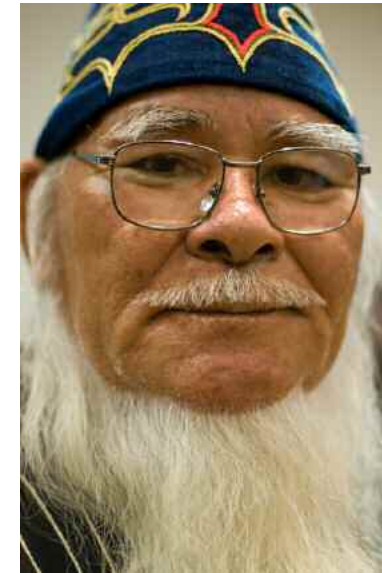
Worst, though, is the underlying discrimination that can still break through the generally smooth surface of Japanese society. Megumi Murakami is 23 and has wide, low cheekbones and beautiful light-brown eyes. She looks unmistakably Ainu. Growing up in Hokkaido, parents would move their children away from her at the public baths, and at school other children shunned her. "Hokkaido has a long way to go. Lots of Ainu hide their identity," she said. For Megumi, this is not an option. Living near Tokyo is easier, although "sometimes people mistake me for a foreigner."

At the Summit, I met a professor from Sapporo University with the same broad cheekbones and wavy hair as many of the Ainu delegates. To the best of his knowledge, he is not Ainu. "Looking at old pictures of my family, though, there are certainly people who are... different looking," he told me. "I guess I'll never know." In Japan, for a fee, discreet background checks can be run on potential employees or inlaws. Rather than simply checking school records, these enquires delve into family history, and will tell you if the person in question is ethnically Ainu, Korean, or *burakumin*, the old caste of untouchables. It was often best to simply hide, and eventually forget, an "undesirable" background.

It is the common ground of discrimination and marginalization, as well as close ties to the land, that allows indigenous peoples to stand together and raise their voices to a level audible to politicians. Although at times the Indigenous People's Summit felt like a celebration, the meetings had a strong political agenda: to bring indigenous issues, and solutions, to the attention of the G8 and the Japanese government.

The Road from Nibutani

Where the future of the Ainu leads from here will depend on what the Ainu can do for themselves: how much they take into their own hands, and how much pressure they are able to put on the government. Being granted indigenous status has been a cause for celebration, but there were few illusions that it was more than a gesture, despite the Japanese government's



Haruzo Urakawa, president of the Tokyo Ainu Association.

ratification of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights.

It is for their language and culture that the Ainu worry most. In an appeal issued to the Japanese government at the conclusion of the Indigenous People's Summit, the Ainu make their point very clear: "We urge the Japanese Government to promptly implement measures which emphasize youth education, such as adopting the Ainu language as one of the official languages of Japan, making it available in compulsory education, and creating history textbooks from Ainu perspectives."

Some are optimistic about the future, like Ainu elder Shizue Okae, who hopes to inspire a younger generation:

"When I was a child all the grandmothers and grandfathers used to come to our home and pray to the gods, and they used to say to me that even though Ainu were discriminated against, remember that it's great; that we are great. What I want to say to the young Ainu is, 'Love yourselves.' I would like to say to all the Ainu in Japan that are hiding the fact that they are Ainu, I want them to know what my grandmother said: we have brothers and sisters in the world. I have been able to meet them." Others, like Haruzo Urakawa, president of the Tokyo Ainu Association, take a more restrained, if practical, position. Says Urakawa, "Even if land is redistributed to us, nobody knows how to use it anymore."

Hirofumi Kibata, Kamuisanihi's son and Sachiko's grandson, is representative of the younger generation attending the summit. Like Masashi Kawakami, he practices Ainu culture and hopes one day to pass it on: "My grandmother and parents have been striving day by day to hand down our Ainu culture to the younger generations. I also desire to become a bearer of Ainu culture."

Kamuisanihi Kibata has an uncanny ability to put things into perspective. It is not just the Ainu; the future is everyone's responsibility. "It is hard to live individually, but it is also hard to live in a community. We have to think about individuality and community. That is the reality that human beings are facing."

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Hirofumi Kibata, Sachiko Kibata's grandson and an enthusiastic practitioner of Ainu culture.